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Bridging the Divide

Call of a New Dawn



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Executive Summary

Three years into the working of Bridge course under the Center for Promotion of Educational and Cultural Advancement of Muslims in India (CPECAMI) initiated by Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) as a part of revolutionary initiatives of its Vice Chancellor Lt. Gen. Zameer uddin Shah, is a testimony of a new educational dawn. The Bridge course as is being implemented under the able leadership of Prof. Rashid Shaz is producing marvelous results since its inception in 2014. The Bridge course as has been aptly named offers a unique opportunity for the madrasa (muslim religious seminary) students to join the mainstream educational courses in colleges and universities. The one year course equips and empowers the madrasa alumina to get acquainted with basic tools of English language, science, social sciences and computer skills. The course has been designed in such a manner that students with their hard work are easily able to compete with their counterparts from the mainstream educational system.

Madrasa and its traditional system of education have been under constant criticism particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. The external allegations of state have been wrongly accusing the Indian madrasas as being safe heavens of ‘terrorists’ based on wrong analogies and misconceptions. The Intra Muslim criticism has been conceived because of the wedge that traditional and modern system of education has created among the Muslims. The alumnus and cadres of each system of education look towards the other with suspicion; strangeness that at times leads to hatred. The



need of the hour is to initiate a dialogue among these seemingly antagonistic systems of education. It is what Bridge course is implementing in a concrete manner since its inception.

The present report takes an objective look at the working of Bridge course, its impact on the lives of its participants and its shortcomings. The general impression about this course has been taken by talking to the faculty of Bridge course, its students, the AMU teaching faculty in different departments, the madrasa teachers of various leading madrasas in India, religious theologians, intellectuals, educationists and scholars.

The methodology implemented in preparation of this monograph is diverse including ethnographic, textual and questionnaire. All the inferences, research and conclusions have been drawn and conceived by the researcher. This report is preliminary in its nature because Bridge course is still in its infant stage. The concrete conclusions can only be drawn and witnessed if Bridge course continues to run successfully on the present lines for a decade or more without a change of guard.



Madrasa and Education of Muslims in India

Islam has made education that would help a person distinguish between right and wrong obligatory. Over the centuries it was education and knowledge that helped Muslims establish a grand knowledge and cultural civilization. Now the days of zenith and glory are long over, and Muslims constitute one of the most backward and least developed communities particularly on educational plank and in terms of knowledge creation. This has rendered Muslims vulnerable and regressive to a point where they are at the receiving end of things. A community that is non contributive to the development of civilization is likely bound to become a butt of ridicule, xenophobia, hate and violence in comparison to other communities. The reasons for this Muslim vulnerability are numerous and varied. Those who want to shift the blame about the present apathy of Muslims would shift the blame to enemies, external factors, neo imperialism and Islamophobia. This conspiracy theory mentality finds easy buyers among the gullible muslim masses, gratifies their ego but does not help to understand and cure deeper malaise.

Those who have a deeper analysis of the factors plaguing the Muslim community and try to offer the prescription while understanding the intra community causes responsible for the pathetic



state of Muslims, have few takers within the community who pay a heed to their call. These internal and intra muslim critics are few and often face hostility from their counterparts, earning their wrath by being tagged as Zionist agents, western stooges and threat to Islam. One of the contemporary issues that has led to the intra muslim division are attempts to blur the division

between traditional system of education represented by madrasas and modern system of education represented by schools, colleges and universities. Both the systems have internalized this fact that they will not allow what they assume as ‘incursion’ of the other in their model of education. The madrasas are not ready to include what they perceive as modern subjects and the mainstream education rarely does include the traditional pedagogical and textual studies in their system.

Islamic weltanschauung of knowledge is holistic. There is no division of knowledge into secular and religious, temporal and transcendental, worldly and spiritual. A division has been enlisted, that is between profitable knowledge (Ilm un Nafiya) and harmful (Ilm un Gairnafiya). Rest the division that we witness today is precedent of the medieval Muslim politics¹, colonialism² and usurpation of power from Muslim empires. The division and establishment of a new parallel system of education in India became evident with the advent of British colonialism that usurped power from the incumbent Mughal ruler in the aftermath of 1857 war of Indian Independence³. The contemporary madrasas trace their origins as independent systems of religious education from that juncture. The colonizers brought with them new system of polity, economy, educational and cultural values that were different from the Muslim belief system and cultural norms. In most Muslim countries it divided the society along the lines of those who collaborated with the Imperialists and those who opposed them. The collaborators became a minority, while vast majority of Muslims opposed their colonizers particularly in their individual capacity and when it came to social values, cultural norms, personal law and educational policies. The colonized Muslim masses could not overthrow through force and power the political, economic and judicial system of the colonizer; hence the masses opposed their educational, cultural and



¹ Rashid Shaz, *Kitab Ul Urooj: Tahzeeb Qurani Safar Ka Ek Chashem Qusha Tazkira*, Milli Publication, New Delhi, India, 2012, P-231.

² Saral Jhingran, *Madrasa Education in Modern India: A Study*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2010, P-131-135.

³ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty Delhi, 1857*, Penguins Books, New Delhi, India, 2007.

social system. This confrontation and opposition gave birth to a miniscule minority among Muslim masses who were for the collaboration and adoption of the educational and cultural system of the colonizer in order to progress and stand shoulder to shoulder with the progressive and developed nations of that time, who were also their colonizers. But the vast majority of masses particularly represented by the Ulama were opposed to it.⁴

The political hostility of British rendered the stalwarts of madrasa education oblivious to the benefits of modern education, its knowledge system as well as the modernity that impacted every sphere of life. This oblivious and self imposed blindness was to continue even after the end of British colonialism from the Indian subcontinent. Madrasas, its faculty and administrators refused to include any subjects and languages of modern streams to what they tagged wrongly as ‘polluting’ the pristine purity of their religious body of knowledge. Thus Ulama and alumina of these madrasas who though are few in number but hold sway and great influence among the Indian Muslims could not guide them towards progress, educational revolution and pathways of success.



⁴ In the case of the Indian subcontinent when British defeated the Last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar during the India's War of Independence in 1857, two reactions among Muslims emerged in its aftermath. One was that of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his Aligarh Movement that urged Muslims to opt for the British educational and cultural system and the other was represented by the Ulama of Deoband who opposed the same, and continued Islamic education on traditional pattern.



Indian Muslims comprise the largest minority in India with a whopping population of 160 million that certainly surpasses the number of Muslims in most Arab countries. But the sad reality is that they are among the most marginalized, downtrodden, destitute and least literate of all communities that inhabit India.⁵ There are a number of reasons for their marginalization including institutional hostility and state apathy towards Muslims in India. But Indian Muslims themselves too are responsible for their marginalization because Ulama who hold a strong influence over the masses have failed to modernize and understand the new educational trends of the contemporary times. The dislike towards modern education has been further reinforced by the fact that Ulama still look at modern education with hostility. They have shaped up this concrete belief that modern education dilutes the character, thinking, religiosity and outlook of its students. If they do not become irreligious but certainly they are rendered areligious. So in order to save Islam from the onslaughts of modernity and its educational system, it needs to seek refuge in the castles of Islam that are the madrasas. They want to ‘preserve Islam’ while rendering it incapable of dealing with the challenges of current times. This ostrich approach has rendered Indian Muslims impotent to play a historical role that Islam envisions for its followers,

⁵ The seven-member High Level Committee, chaired by Justice Rajindar Sachar, submitted its final report to the Prime Minister on November 17, 2006. The Sachar report made it evident that Indian Muslims are among the most marginalized sections of Indian society. The complete report titled *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim community in India*, also known as the Sachar committee report can be accessed at http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/sachar_comm.pdf (As accessed on September, 22, 2016).



though not all or a majority of Muslim children study in madrasas, but the religious aura, clout and doctors of divinity add up to multiply their impact on the common masses. Hence it becomes an inevitable reality that bridges need to be built in order to overcome the divide, which has been created by the division of knowledge.



Bridge Course: Call for a New Dawn

The call for bridging the artificial though now permanent divide created by the antagonistic systems of education is not a new one. Indian reformers from Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad all have deliberated about the need for a change in madrasa curriculum, which is properly known as Dars e Nizami⁶. Dars e Nizami as it was conceived was very progressive and addressed the needs of its times. This fact can be understood from the fact that in its original form Dars e Nizami curriculum included ninety percent of secular subject books and only ten percent constituted of religious order.⁷ This curriculum over the centuries witnessed many changes, that constituted removal and inclusion of many texts prompting many scholars and historians and even one of the founders of madrasa Nadwatul Ulama, Shibli Noamani to remark that Dars e Nizami as prevalent was retrograded from what Mulla Nizamuddin had earlier formulated and taught, because at one point of time even music was included as a part of Dars e Nizami.⁸ But now over a century after Dars e Nizami curriculum was accepted as a universal curriculum, very few changes in the books prescribed have been included thus it has been rendered stagnant over time, though there have been reformist voices even from within the madrasa Ulama to incur changes in the curriculum so as to put an end to the educational duality, antagonism and divide. “The duality of the education systems which has found currency among Muslims after the establishment of the government (read colonial British) that holds sway over the country should be done away with and only one system should be adopted. It is for this reason that I have called my educational scheme ‘the theory of unification of the educational system’”⁹. The end to duality announced by one of stalwarts of Deobandi madrasa that is also known as *Umm ul Madaris* (Mother of all madrasas)¹⁰ found no takers even within its own bastion. Some earlier attempts were made to end the quality of education whose highest manifestation is Nadwatul Ulama¹¹ and for inclusion of both modern and religious sciences. But over the decades, it also retrograded to a typical madrasa though few ‘modern’ subjects and basic English language are taught at primary level.

⁶ This curriculum is prevalent in most Indian madrasas but many madrasas do not follow it strictly. For more about this debate See Saral Jhingran, “Madrasa Nisabs: An effort to Understand them and a Critique” in *Madrasa Education in Modern India: A Study*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2010, P-169-225.

⁷ Maulana Manazir Ahsan Gilani, *Hindustan Mey Musalmanu Ka Nizam e Taleem wa Tarbiyat*, Vol I, Maktaba Al Haq, Mumbai, 2007, P-274-275.

⁸ Shibli Noamani, *Maqalaat e Shibli, Vol III*, Darul Musnafeen, Azamgarh, 1955, P-134.

⁹ Maulana Sayyid Manazir Ahsan Gilani, Introduction and Translation Madiha Younas, *Outlines of a Unified Educational System for Muslims*” occasional papers 90, Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan, 2008, P-4-5.

¹⁰ Founded in 1866. For more about Deoband movement see, Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*, Royal Book Company, Karachi, Pakistan, 1989.

¹¹ Founded in 1894. For further information see, Maulana Muhammad Ishaq Jalees Nadwi, *Tareeh Nadwatul Ulama, Part I*, Majlis Sihafat wa Nashriyat, Nadwatul Ulama, Lucknow, 2014.



The founder of Aligarh Movement that led to the establishment of Aligarh Muslim University in 1920, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was aware of the shortcomings of madrasa curriculum and its failure in addressing the modern issues.¹² He tried to bridge the divide, but due to his controversial views on various matters related to muslim theology, proximity to British colonial rulers, political stance and somewhat being overawed by West, his scheme found few takers. In the aftermath of Indian Independence in 1947 many attempts were conceptualized by AMU to help madrasa students join the mainstream education. AMU recognized degrees of various madrasas that rendered its students eligible for admission in few streams particularly languages Urdu, Arabic and subjects like Islamic studies and theology. The centre for Promotion of science at AMU also holds workshops and refresher courses for students and teachers of madrasas in order to acquaint them with new developments in the field and help inculcate empirical, scientific temperament.



¹² Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, *Maqalat e Sir Syed, Vol 8*, compiled by Maulana Muhammad Ismail Panipati, Majlis Taraqi e Adab, Lahore, 1991, P-75-76.



Bridge course as started in 2014 under the auspices of CPECAMI by AMU is manifestation of the dream of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan who hoped to bridge the divide between traditional and modern knowledge systems. It is being realized by Vice Chancellor Lt. Gen. Zameer uddin Shah and implemented by the dynamic versatile polymath scholar of contemporary India Prof. Rashid Shaz. Bridge course offers an opportunity to the students of madrasas to get admitted to a year long course that includes modern subjects like sociology, geography, history, reasoning, conceptual writing, political science, critical thinking, computer applications and above all English language. The curriculum of the bridge course is designed in such a manner that the student is able to internalize the proper skills that are essential for their educational empowerment. These skills certainly with their hard work evolve their potential and capacity that helps them to compete with the general line students to secure admissions in various streams of humanities and social sciences.

Around fifty students are admitted through a competitive exam that tests the knowledge of students. After the all India common entrance/screening tests, shortlisting of students is done through personal interviews. The admitted students of madrasas are new to this environment where both genders participate in the classroom discussion. This classroom culture is mixed wherein pedagogy of dialogue is encouraged unlike madrasa classrooms. The students within a few weeks gel up with the new atmosphere and due to the hard work of faculty and grit of the students, every student initiates the preparation for the bigger goals in academic life.

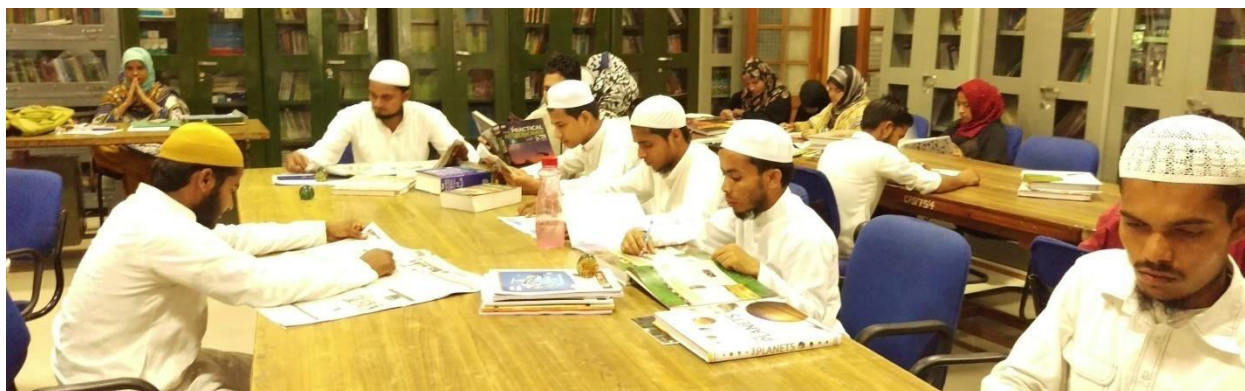


The Bridge course is a multi disciplinary center of supplemental studies. The teachers at the bridge course are drawn from various departments and syllabus too is multi variant that includes a number of subjects. The curriculum has been designed in such a manner that it offers a holistic exposure of the student to the modern branches of knowledge and discipline. A general consensus for an intense focus on English language for students from the *deeni(Religious) madaris* is much emphasized because English language skills are inevitable for any academic study at university and work place. The subject has been divided in the components like Reading and Writing skills, oral communication and public speaking, conceptual writing and grammar. The course uses pedagogical tools of lectures, audio visual aids and writing assignments in order to acquaint the students with the nuances of the English language. Thus at the end of the academic year the learners are able to read, understand, analyze and comprehend English texts. They are further able to understand, deliver English lectures and write expository essays and letters of correspondence. The language skills of madrasa students mostly remain under developed particularly in Arabic and Urdu, even though they have spent a decade or more in a madrasa. Most of them cannot write a proper Urdu or Arabic. English is being still upheld as an enemy language by most madrasas despite the fact that the founder of Darul Uloom Deoband Maulana Qasim Nanatawi, was desirous of learning English, though circumstances and death did not allow him realize this dream of acquiring a new language.¹³ The English language has now the status of a universal language, so it becomes a necessary tool for communicating the message of Islam to other people. But madrasas have been oblivious to this fact and Bridge course certainly is helping to fulfill this lacuna.

¹³ Quoted in Sultan Ahmad Islahi, *Hindustan Mey Madaris Arabiya Key Masail*, Idarah Ilm o Adab, Aligarh, India, 1996, P-18-19.

Alongwith the emphasis on English language the general education component of the syllabus acquaints the students with awareness of international affairs, introduces them to social sciences like political science, sociology, economics, geography, history while at the same time offering them an opportunity to learn simple mathematics, reasoning and aptitude. Computer skills that have become inevitable for communication, dissemination of knowledge, and the lessons of its basics are imparted to the students.

One of the unique features of Bridge course that makes it holistic is the lectures and discussions that are included in the “Interfath and Intrafaith Understanding”. Most of the madrasa students are fed on a heavy diet of sectarianism and self righteousness. The whole emphasis is on the *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) and from Juristic lenses every other subject is taught and interpreted. This juristic interpretation of Islam has given rise to sectarianism and rigid following of sectarian school of thoughts. Quran, Prophetic biography, Muslim legacy and history are very little emphasized and encouraged in madrasa curriculum, even Hadith (Prophetic sayings, practice and teachings are not taught as it is but through and subordinate to *Fiqh*).¹⁴ The students in madrasas are made to believe that only their interpretation of Islam is correct and other schools of thought, though maybe correct but certainly are deviated.



The perception about non muslims is that they constitute the fuel of hell. So this self righteousness certainly creates a mind that is not open to the truths and facts that are available with others. In such an atmosphere only rabid debates can be held.¹⁵ The traditional Ulama still believe that winning an argument is preponderant to winning a person. The age of debates to prove others wrong has been long superseded by dialogue discussions and forums for mutual understanding. The culture of dialogue is essential to understand the worldview of others and put ones perspective on the table. This component of Bridge course certainly exposes the students to different interpretations and perspectives where one is able to comprehend the plurality of views.

¹⁴ Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *Al Risala Monthly*, New Delhi, India, September 200, No. 286, P-75.

¹⁵ Madrasas train their students in the nuances of debate (Manazira) where whole emphasis is to defeat the opponent by pointing out flaws in their interpretation and schools of thought. This leads to students becoming good rabble rousers and fiery speakers once they leave madrasas.

These views are essential to build a culture of brotherhood, peace, love and mutual understanding with each other. Sectarianism over these centuries has been creating more hatred and violence than love, more heat than light, more animosity than *Ummatic* concern. The interfaith and intrafaith understanding certainly helps students inculcate a temperament and tolerance to listen to the perspective of others and shun the attitude of self righteousness.



Respect all and follow one certainly has become one of the principles of Bridge course students. The plurality of interpretations about Islam of which they were oblivious certainly has played a positive role in strengthening the mutual bond of respect, tolerance, fellow feeling and learning among them. The energies, potential and talent was previously wasted on mutual bickering, wronging others, declaring them heretic is now being productively used for mutual understanding and achieving common collective goals.

At the completion of the syllabus the students are made to sit for examinations practical, theoretical, written and viva voce. Those who qualify the exams after a rigorous study during one academic year are awarded a certificate of senior secondary school in arts and social sciences (+2 madrasa stream). This award of certificate renders them eligible for a range of streams at bachelors level that include but are not limited to English, law, political science, economics, history honors. Further Bridge course students have the privilege of being treated as internal students of AMU, thus multiplying their chances of getting selected in a number of streams of their choice. Bridge course certainly acts as a career booster for these students.

Further Bridge course is helping realize the dream of Maulana Manazir Ahsan Gilani, a madrasa product who believed in ending the distinction between Mulla and Mister. “Every alim would be



a graduate and every graduate an alim; every Mulla will be a Mr and every Mr a Mulla. The issue of the division between an alim and an educated person (that is educated in the modern stream of learning) will come to an end.”¹⁶ Bridge course is paving way for such a future.

Perceptions about Bridge Course

In order to understand the viability, impact, positive outcomes and shortcomings of the Bridge course in its short span of implementation spread over just four years, the researcher has the privilege of talking to scores of scholars, intellectuals Ulama of madaris as well as alumnus and current students of course about their experiences of the journey during the Bridge course. This task of gathering perspectives was carried over a period of few months. Madrasas and their students at this juncture are going through an onslaught of hostile media and politicians that

¹⁶ Maulana Sayyid Manzoor Ahsan Gilani, Introduction and Translation Madiha Younas, *opcit*, P-8

allege them to be the dens of terror.¹⁷ On the other hand madrasa education is supposed to teach jaundiced and prejudiced worldview that is bound to create antagonism and hostility. “A number of children go to madrasa and makhtabs. The imparting of religious education leads to mental isolation of groups and promotes craving for identity and exclusiveness... This type of education generates religious and communal prejudices”.¹⁸



The Bridge course is preparing its students to dispel these myths. How successful the alumnus of Bridge course are in these feats only time can tell but certainly students are experiencing the opening of new horizons before them that certainly have made them ambitious because a whole new world of opportunities awaits them. In order to garner the insight into working of Bridge course, the investigator had the privilege to stay with Bridge course students. The impact of bridge course was experienced by staying in different madrasas talking to their faculty, administrators and students. The initiation of the Bridge course has its ramifications within the citadel of AMU as was understood by interviewing various faculty members of different departments both retired and inservice.

The students of Bridge course who are the direct beneficiaries of the course had varied stories to share about their respective journeys that certainly are worth quoting and documenting as

¹⁷ The allegations of terrorism about Indian madrasas have been successfully refuted by scholars like Yoginder Sikand in *Bastions of Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India*, Penguin books, Delhi, 2005 and Jamal Malik (ed), *Madrasas in South Asia: Teaching Terror?* Routledge, London, 2008.

¹⁸ J.M Khan, *Education among Muslims*, Classic Publishing House, Jaipur, 1993, P-129.

manifestations and testimonies of its success for the future generations. The perspectives and perceptions have been documented in the following pages.



Perspectives Within: AMU Faculty about Bridge Course Initiative

Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) has hundreds of big and small departments, allied disciplines and streams of knowledge. The conceptualization and initiation of a new revolutionary course is an addition to its long list of courses. This new course has drawn mixed reactions of admiration, fear, hope and distrust from the faculty members of other existing departments.

In order to understand their support and apprehension, it was essential to reach out to them to understand their version about the current development of Bridge course. The first person to be interviewed was Dr Mufti Zahid A Khan, former chairman, department of Sunni Theology and Mufti of Aligarh city. He was all praise for the Bridge course initiative under the tutelage of the present vice chancellor Lt. Gen. Zameer Uddin Shah. He emphasized that the course should continue on the present lines, though a lot of improvement needs to be incorporated to render it much more productive for the students. At last he sounded caution about the stewardship of the course, as the present Director Prof. Rashid Shaz is not an academic per se and is controversial in the muslim circles, so there is a lot of apprehension about him misusing his official position for raking up controversies, though Mufti Zahid acknowledges that “His views are different and the work he is doing is something else”. Mufti further emphasized for vocational training of students too.



“Introduction of Computers, social sciences and English language cannot make the madrasa students modernized if their worldview is traditional”, observed Prof. Syed Ali Muhammad Naqvi, Dean Faculty of Shia Theology. Naqvi was all praise for the Bridge course, though he remarked that he is not fully acquainted with the complete details and implementation of the course but still it offers a unique chance to madrasa graduates to study social sciences in prestigious universities like AMU. “The quantum of study of social sciences should not dilute the religious curriculum, though unlike sectarian reading of texts, study of social sciences does not render students exclusivist, intolerant and sectarian. Also the inter and intra faith lectures and knowledge should not render a person to give up the fundamentals of his school of thought, but help the student of knowledge to celebrate diversity not only tolerate it. The plurality of interpretation needs to be celebrated. Unity cannot be imposed but will come from deeper understanding of issues. The Bridge course can certainly help strengthen these principles”, stated Naqvi.



“Bridge course certainly should continue as it is the medium through which new horizons and vistas are being opened up for the madrasa students. AMU has got the privilege of being a pioneer institution that has opened up a new world for the students of madrasas, who can continue their education in the contemporary fields after they graduate from madrasa system of education. Science subjects should also be included in the Bridge course curriculum and it should not be confined only to social sciences” confided Prof Muhammad Saud Alam Qasimi, Dean faculty of Sunni Theology. He is for inclusion of experimentation, empirical method, education for women and interfaith dialogue.¹⁹ According to Prof. Saud, India is religiously and linguistically a diverse nation. So as citizens one needs to know about the other. But our Ulama and madrasa students do not know about Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, The madrasas should introduce teaching about those religions in their curriculum but they have failed to do so till now. “We are interacting with hindus and others on political level but on social and intellectual level our interaction with them is still minimum. But now Bridge course certainly offers a ray of hope as students certainly get a brush of knowledge about other religions and schools of thought”, remarked Prof Saud. But such words of appreciation were few.

¹⁹ Prof. Dr Muhammad Saud Alam Qasimi, *Rasool e Karim Ki Taalmi Tahreek*, Faculty of Deeniyat, AMU, 2014.



“Rashid Shaz is not a madrasa product. He is not aware about madrasa issues and certainly is in no position to offer a correct remedy about madrasas. If Rashid Shaz continues to lead the bridge course, it is bound to decline and die an early death” is the criticism of Dr Obaidullah Fahd Falahi, Associate Professor, department of Islamic Studies. He further added that, “no one in AMU fraternity has problem with the Bridge course but certainly it is the controversial personality of Dr Rashid Shaz that makes us apprehensive about the future of Bridge course. He should be relieved of such immense responsibility, the sooner the better”. Dr Fahd remarked that madrasas like Jamiat ul Falah incorporated many changes since last three decades. Further “Madrasas do not inculcate sectarianism among the students but politicians do, though every school of thought has some features of sectarianism but politicians exaggerate and exploit them for their own vested interest. Intra and Interfaith Dialogue both are new clichés that have clandestine political connotation. Mostly those who are involved in these initiatives have no following or influence among masses and sincere Ulama are mostly left out from these dialogue rounds”. At last Dr Fahd remarked that, “madrasas should include change, overhaul their curriculum, add new subjects, have Hindu scholars invited for guest lectures and be mobilized for introducing change within, so that initiatives like Bridge course are needed minimum”.²⁰

“Bridge course is essential, important and helpful too. But it should not make the students go for an unrestricted reform, that will retrograde them to lose their identity”, were the words of Prof. Masud Ahmad of the department of Biochemistry. “We need to develop curiosity among students as Quran time and again emphasis for *Tafakarun* (Pondering, Deep Thinking),

²⁰ Dr Obaidullah Fahd though has an expertise on Muslim revivalist movements but has translated from Arabic a treatise about duality of education systems written by Dr Taha Jabir Al Awani, *Deeni Taleem: Islah wa Jamood ki Kashmakash Ka Mutala*, Institute of Objective Studies, New Delhi, 2012.

encourages novelty, questioning spirit and welcomes new interpretation by students though not an unrestrained one. The incorrect interpretation of Islam leads to sectarianism and if a sect tries to undermine Islam, certainly it can be concluded that it is wrong. Bridge course if it can inculcate the spirit of enquiry, tolerance, co existence among students despite difference certainly can do marvelous work with such principles”, concluded Prof. Masud in his short interview.

Prof. Abdur Rahim Kidwai, Director Academic Staff College, was reluctant to be interviewed as he quite rightly acknowledged the fact that he has not studied much about the madrasas. But later on he did agree to meet. He had hopeful statements about the working of the Bridge course and the positive impact it was having on the lives of madrasa graduates. Prof. Kidwai expressed hope that the Bridge course should run with vibrant success unlike other courses that were initiated with much fanfare but over years they were rendered recluse and now are dragging on just to maintain their existence without life.



Prof. Kunwar Muhammad Yusuf Amin of department of Ilmul Advia criticized the dichotomy between knowledge being labeled as worldly and religious. He further added that, “Western and Islamic worldview about knowledge are opposed to each other, because in West knowledge has no relation or reference with transcendental truth. In West religion (read Islam) is read as an object not something divine. So how can western universities teach problem of revelation as divine? An attempt was made to co relate these systems of knowledge through Islamization of knowledge and it certainly has been problematic. Thus Ulama do not understand many epistemological and other deeper issues about knowledge and education”. These questions certainly are academic in nature and deserve to be engaged with”. When asked about his views regarding Bridge course, Prof. Kunwar sounded apprehensive with the one man show running

the course. “Bridge course certainly is a boon for madrasa students, but it should be tentative at this stage and certainly defined, contributed and implemented by all the stakeholders. Why should one person (reference to Dr Rashid Shaz) define all the contours of bridge course? Which advisory council has been formed where all prominent members of AMU can give vent to their thoughts and opinions about the bridge course, its implementation and ways to improve it further”.



“Science, its fundamentals, temperament, and deductive methodology all can be traced back to Muslims. The empirical, experimental and observation methodology were the unique features of Muslim civilization. The attitude of acceptance towards knowledge is what evolved us as a contributive community towards knowledge. But now we have such an abysmal amount of illiteracy among our ranks that our madrasa students cannot even write their names properly. We do not want madrasas to change their curriculum of religious sciences, but we just want them to add few subjects so that their students can become much more productive and contributive citizens of muslim community of India. We certainly do not want madrasas to dilute their education, but want them to improve and better their standards” stated Dr Kalimuddin, Director R C College

“The success of Bridge course can be discerned from this fact that madrasa students learning English in such a short period is in itself nothing short of a miracle. The Bridge course as it is institutionalized in AMU needs to be replicated in many other places and it will become self

evident for madrasa administrators, the essence and success of the same. Most madrasas do not have qualified faculty as we have a madrasa in every nook and cranny. Bridge course certainly can help madrasas benefit from it as Ulama exposed to modern trends and subjects would contribute much productively as teachers. Bridge course certainly has opened the doors of privilege even for the madrasas as a world of opportunities awaits them to be explored and benefitted from”, Prof. Kalimuddin concluded.



“What are you? A journalist, research scholar or stooge that Rashid Shaz has employed to do a positive P.R for his bridge course. If he has emphasized you to gather views about Bridge course, so certainly you will be biased in your reporting as you are being paid for the work. So your objectivity is compromised” were the barrage of questions Prof. Asmer Beg Head department of Political Science had for the researcher. I pacified him with justifications and my independence as a researcher. “Bridge course is there and it is an attempt to have a holistic concept of knowledge implemented, but to what extent? Bridge course is successful needs to be witnessed with time. I have been part of various meetings and some implementation part of the Bridge course and certainly it needs to be appreciated. At the abstract level of the idea and objectives we have cooperation but whether these objectives are realized and achieved only then can the efforts of Bridge course be applauded”

Prof. Beg while further expressing his views stated, “Universal formula of pedagogy cannot be followed because aptitudes and learning abilities of students are different, Further students coming from madrasas certainly have additional problems after being exposed to a new world of learning. Inter and Intra Faith antagonistic issues deeply embedded in psyche of madrasa students so it needs persuasive and concrete efforts to make them open up for a dialogue. Small

initiatives and simplistic understanding of complex issues need to be incorporated only then can such initiatives prove fruitful. Bridge course certainly can be a precursor for a permanent positive change among Indian Muslims, if it continues to run on present lines, evolving further by incorporating positive changes and feedback from time to time”.

Dr Mubarak Hussain of Department of Medicine was all praises for the Bridge course led by the able Dr Rashid Shaz. “The results of bridge course are amazing. If madrasa students with just one year of acquaintance with modern subjects can crack competitive exams securing admissions in different streams like law, English literature, political science, economics, history it certainly has shattered the myth of madrasa students being incompetent. Bridge course miracle can be replicated by madrasas too who now have no excuse of burdening the students with extra subjects left in their kitty. The madras students are deeply motivated towards education and seeking knowledge, and madrasas should lose no time to brood over the inclusion of modern subjects in their curriculum”.

“If madrasas had already included English language and other allied subjects within their curriculum then there was no need for a bridge course to be started by AMU. But now when the Bridge course is running successfully and producing marvelous results, there should be no scope for criticism for sake of it only and rabid opposition. Yes certainly there is always the need for improvement that can be included through positive feedback instead of sheer opposition. Science subjects should also be incorporated but then the duration needs to be extended for two years, as one academic year is not enough to have a grasp over science subjects. The inter and intra faith understanding classes also need to be applauded. The Bridge course should continue and must extend its intake capacity too” Prof Hussain concluded.

Muhammad Salahuddin Umari of Arabic department, AMU states, “Bridge course is providing opportunities to madrasa students by welcoming them to a new world of academics and knowledge. Social sciences and languages can be taught through bridge course but certainly pure sciences cannot be”. Similar views were obtained from Prof. Samina Khan of English department, Prof. Ismat Ara, principal womens college and Dr Roshan Ara, department of Philosophy besides Prof. Abul Kalam Qasimi, Urdu Department all are very much happy with Bridge course and its progress.

After talking to the active members of AMU faculties, it was time to reach out to some retired academicians. With some the investigator was able to contact, while others like Prof. Asloob Ahmad Ansari were bedridden to talk, several were out of station. Prof. Masudul Hasan is retired English professor who willingly accepted my request for being interviewed. “One academic year is not enough to teach disciplines of various hues like Mathematics, English, social sciences. In single year such subjects certainly cannot be taught with justice. More emphasis seems to be on quantity not quality. Bridge courses are meant for small jobs not for some serious study and previous attempts have failed” deliberated Prof. Hasan.

He further depicted his concern and advised that, “If Ulama cannot be incorporated in Bridge course, it will remain superficial. It certainly needs to have Ulama and others as stakeholders and it cannot afford to write off Ulama as retrogressive. Also the syllabus needs to be made more comprehensive. Extracurricular lectures needs to be delivered for science. Efforts should also be made to make students empowered so that they can consult encyclopedias and books independently”.



“Bridge course that has been started by AMU is not something new or innovative. I am the product of such a bridge course. After I completed the madrasa education, I came to Jamia Millia Islamia and special classes were held where we got acquainted and exposed to new subjects, particularly the social sciences. We could get admission in many subjects for higher studies. Unfortunately due to anti madrasa feelings JMI later did discontinue such courses”, articulated Prof. Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui former Head Department of Islamic Studies, AMU.

Prof. Siddiqui is critical of the role of Ulama, madrasas in spreading intolerance and sectarianism among Muslims and becomes nostalgic about his own days as a student in Nadwatul Ulama. “In our times, there was no sectarian emphasis in madrasas and now madrasas of a particular school of thought (maslak) do not admit students from other maslaks. The masjids too have been retrograded as the wrestling grounds of proving one maslak correct and declaring another deviant. The hate against each other has escalated so much that even during Hajj followers of some sects stay away from offering prayers in the revered sanctuary of Kaaba. Intra Faith

dialogue and mutual understanding will certainly help in smashing the walls of hatred, sectarianism and intolerance. Ulama certainly have a vital role to play in this context, but they have to embrace the universal message of Islam first, without dividing it into components. Intra Faith dialogue certainly can help bridge the divide”.

“Bridge course has provided a new opening for the madrasa graduates. This model should be replicated at other places too. The earlier attempts of change in the madrasa curriculum have failed, so a unified syllabus for Muslim students could not be drafted. Further the government does not offer recognition to the madrasa courses except in some circumstances, as a result we have so many Imams and Ulama who survive on donations, without contributing anything substantial for the community development. But bridge course certainly paves way for the madrasa students to enter the university education and become productive members of the society”, were the words of Prof. Rahimullah Khan, retired Prof. of department of Physics.

When asked about the functioning of Rashid Shaz about whom most faculty members do not have a high regard, he aptly observed, “If someone from other maslak (school of thought) would be made director then will it not be controversial? Every person has his/her flaws so instead of concentrating on those we should direct our energies at the work that he/she is undertaking and help them improve the same. One academic year is enough for covering the senior secondary level of social sciences and English language but for science stream it is not sufficient. Also bridge course later on can start some skill development or craft for madrasa students who do not want to go for higher education”.



Preliminary Findings

After interviewing good number of faculty members of AMU about the Bridge course, both formally and informally a mixed bag of reaction was received. Most faculty members applaud this course because the academic council of AMU has passed the resolution for the establishment of Bridge course. If they had not been appreciative of the idea, it would have been aborted in its infancy. But many among them demand decentralization, establishment of advisory committee, seeking opinions from different members while decision making. Some of these opinions are positive and few changes can be incorporated in the working of Bridge course. Some faculty members are certainly opposed to the course.²¹

For others Bridge course certainly is a commendable initiative but appointing Dr Rashid Shaz has been one of the blunders that needs to be rectified because Rashid Shaz to them is no academic, who had to follow the rigorous system of university to earn the professorship through promotions. Instead he was appointed directly as a Professor and later on a full fledged department was handed over to him while ‘sidelining many eligible candidates’. If one believes their allegations then Rashid Shaz used a lot of good offices and lobbying for being appointed as Professor and Director of Bridge course. This kind of criticism is more based on personal animosity and job envy, than on merit because Rashid Shaz is an institution in himself who has contributed a wealth of academic output as it is evident from his writings available in different languages. Many of these faculty members are angry that despite being in AMU for more than two decades they still have not been able to become full fledged professors that Rashid Shaz already is. For others, they are angry because they deserve the directorship of Bridge course instead of Dr Shaz. Thus it can be very well inferred that with the success of Bridge course students who already are a part of different disciplines in AMU, the criticism will die a natural death with each passing day.



²¹ Prof. Arshi Khan of Department of West Asian studies, while opposing Bridge course had stated that madrasas incorporate terrorism, thus alleging that starting bridge course would have severe ramifications for AMU. Unlike Arshi some will not go officially on record about their opposition, but feel that Bridge course is not needed. They do not share this view publicly being salaried employees the open criticism will invite threat to their careers.

Bridge Course Functioning: Perspectives from Outside

The issue of madrasa reforms is community issue, in which every conscious section of Muslim community takes interest. Bridge course is an attempt at madrasa reforms, though it takes place outside the madrasa paradigm, thus it became essential to collect views, opinions and feedback from different sections of society. Prof. Safdar Sultan Islahi²², who was the Secretary of Idarah e Tahqeeq o Tasneef e Islami: Institute of Islamic Research and Training based in Aligarh associated with Jamaat e Islami, India while responding to the query about Bridge course observed, “What vice chancellor Lt Gen. Zameeruddin Shah and Rashid Shaz are claiming to be a new beginning is not new but is quite old. Ulama are not ignorant about the changing trends so a number of madrasas like Nadwatul Ulama, Jamiat ul Islah have incorporated these changes. It is because of these reasons that scores of faculty members teaching in AMU, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jamia Hamdard are from madrasas. So bridge course is not something very new. Syed Hamid the AMU vice chancellor 1980-85 also started such an initiative to get madrasa students into university”.

“Interfaith and Intra faith positives for students are debatable, though vested interested play a role in sectarianism. Though the present V.Cs idea of starting the Bridge course should certainly be appreciated but on what criteria? He (Rashid Shaz) was selected and why only he was chosen still remains a mystery, though it is a factual reality that there is no substantial contribution of Dr Shaz to madrasas, its study and he has no experience of being a madrasa product” observed Dr Islahi.



²² Prof. Safdar Sultan Islahi died in a tragic car accident on 18 February, 2017.

Dr Zaki Kirmani, Director Center for studies on Science and Editor Ayaat (Signs) Quarterly journal is vehemently critical of division of knowledge that renders it into worldly and religious spheres. He is critical of the way madrasas are functioning through which no great work of scholarship has been produced and the emphasis is much more on maslak rather than Islam. He is critical of university system of education too wherein research is being sponsored by corporates. When enquired about the Bridge course, he was appreciative of its efforts though with the added caution that nothing substantial can be stated in its early stages with authentication. “If only it continues for a decade the substantial gains can be calculated. The change in point of view of students, their pluralistic attitude and understanding different points of view are remarkable gains. Also with the training of one year the students are able to crack competitive examples is a living testimony of the fact that it certainly is achieving the objectives of its foundation”.

Dr Kirmani when asked about the apprehension of many, whether the madrasa students will remain committed to Islam after they complete the university education, he aptly replied “Madrasas compete and siphon off a lot of money as charity. So how is the competition of jobs making madrasa students with university degrees wrong? They can contribute better if they are in good jobs and business. So this assumption is quite flawed. The change through Bridge course will be gradual and evolutionary. There can be shortcomings but certainly its fruits will be witnessed in near future, which will be enough to rebut any ill informed criticism of the course and its present Director”.





Prof. Ishtiaq Ahmad Zilli, is a versatile personality who wears many caps. He is the Director of Shibli Academy, Darul Musnafieen and President Idarah Uloom ul Quran. He is quite critical about the fact of how the madrasas are being run, though is critical of administration in government institutions too, where corruption is quite rampant. He feigned his ignorance about the working and curriculum of Bridge course, but did appreciate its efforts of making a whole new world available to the madrasa students. At the same time Prof. Zilli is quite apprehensive of the fact that if it is being run by Dr Rashid Shaz then certainly it can create problems in various quarters. Prof. Zilli became quite appreciative of the fact when various components and modules of Bridge course were described to him, he stated, “madrasas are the source of rigidity in maslaks and in most madrasas the Fiqhi reading is conducted in such a manner that of making Hanafi maslak superior to all of Ummah. Instead of emphasizing on maslaks much stress must be laid on teaching Quran and allied disciplines. Shibli Noamani more than a century before introduced English and Sanskrit in Nadwatul Ulama curriculum, that certainly was changed after his death. It created a veil of ignorance for madras students who could not understand other beliefs and their adherents. Now if Bridge course has initiated a step, it needs to be probed how successful will they get in purging the ignorance of few centuries”. This call for unity is quite old, but none has paid serious heed or took practical steps to implement the same. “One day at the time of *Fajr*, I went to see Maulana Sayyid Muhammad Anwar Shah Kashmiri, and found him sitting in the dark, holding his head in grief. I asked him what the matter was? He replied that he was feeling fine. He only regretted wasting his life. I commented, Hadrat, your entire life has been spent in the service of knowledge and in propagation of Din. Thousands of your

students are Ulama. They are famous and have benefitted from you. They are all serving Din. If your life has been wasted, then whose life has been profitable?

Moulana Anwar: I am telling you the truth. I have wasted my life.

Mufti Shafi: Hadrat, what is the matter?

Moulana Anwar: The summary of all our endeavors, our life and our lectures was that the *Hanafi* school of thought is superior to others. We searched for the proofs of the *masail* of Imam Abu Hanifa and proved them stronger than the other Imams. Now I am pondering and wondering in what I wasted my life. Was Imam Abu Hanifa in need of our giving preference to him? Did we have to do him a favor? The people have acknowledged the position which Allah had given him. He is not in need of us. What is the result of the preference we are giving over Imam Shafi, Imam Malik and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the jurists of other schools? It is nothing more than saying that our school of thought is correct with the possibility of error while other schools of thought are incorrect with the possibility of being correct. There is no other result besides this in our research.

As far the grave even the angels *Munkar* and *Nakir* will not ask whether raising the hands in *Salah* is correct or not raising the hands in *Salah* is correct or not. *Ameen* uttered softly is correct or audibly. There will be no question regarding these issues in the life of *barzakh*²³ as well as in the grave. We went after something that we did not need to bleach in this world, in the life of *barzakh* or the hereafter and thus wasted our lives. We used our energy for it instead of using it for the correct propagation of Islam which is unanimously accepted by everyone”²⁴.

Sultan Ahmad Islahi²⁵ is a Jamaat e Islami scholar who now resigned from JeI citing ideological incompatibility. He is the author of the book *Hindustan Mey Madaris Arabiya Key Masail, Idarah Ilm Wa Adab*. He has been a vociferous critic of madrasa curriculum, its administration and one of the leading voices for reforms in madrasa as his book is a manifestation of the same thought. He confided that, “Bridge course and its administrators should not be much idealist, ambitious or enthusiastic as some revolutionary change cannot be expected within a short span of time. They should emphasize on language and social sciences and at this juncture it is enough for them. Science should not be added at this stage as the students should not be overburdened when they have just been introduced to a new system of knowledge. Also in few madaris, a little exposure of social sciences and English language is there, but pure science and its philosophy is something new for the madrasa students who have no previous background in science subjects”.

²³ The intermediary stage between this world and the hereafter.

²⁴ Mufti Muhammad Shafi Uthmani, *Unity of the Ummah*, Farid Book Depot, New Delhi, 2004, P-19-22.

²⁵ Maulana Sultan Ahmad Islahi died on 29 May, 2016.



“Bridge course students can certainly with their grit, hard work and proper guidance become the messengers of Islam in the world as they would be grounded in both systems of knowledge. The Ulama have till now failed to produce any substantial type of response to modernity, epistemology and its challenges. They still are caught up in a web of delusion about West where they are critical of vulgarity but cannot understand even simple facts like Nobel Prize, nation states. This lack of knowledge and research leads to many social and political problems that Muslim world is currently baffling with. Also the madrasas are not the same as envisioned by its founders, both Deoband and Nadwatul Ulama. Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanatawi and the curriculum he implemented was quite progressive, he wanted to include English and later wanted the students to join madrasas. Now Deoband is not the same as was envisioned by Nanatawi. Thus now there is a need for a radical change in the curriculum, though I have little hope from the old madaris to incorporate the change. So the need of the hour is to establish a new one that can address the modern mind and face the current challenges”, concluded Islahi.

The voices for change in madrasas are not new as, “In place of old and outdated rational science, modern social and natural sciences and humanities should be taught as well as comparative religion. In this way, the graduates of madrasas would be better informed about the conditions of

the contemporary world and hence would be in a better position to give their legal opinions as Fatwas on matters related to Islamic jurisprudence....Those who besides their own religion, study subjects like history, economics, sociology, political science and comparative religion are better equipped to handle the challenges that modernity places before us all. In medieval times, leading Muslim Ulama did likewise. Faced with the challenges of Greek philosophy, they mastered it and medieval madrasas produced leading Muslim philosophers, scientists, logicians and mathematicians who were also pious Muslim themselves. So there is no reason why the Ulema of today should not do the same and learn modern subjects”.²⁶



Dr Zafar Ul Islam Khan states, “The entire madrasa system in the country is badly in need of a total reappraisal of a revolutionary change in methods and scope. Many madrasas are certainly not serving the purpose for which they were intended. In the case of many madrasas, what they teach is of little use to the wider society. They are churning out vast numbers of muslims, only some of whom can be absorbed into the system. The others turn into a burden on Muslim society, because they have not been trained in such a way as to be an asset to the community.....I also think that the syllabus of the madrasas needs a radical overhaul”.²⁷

Dr Waris Mazhari is one of leading voices of madrasa reforms. He has been advocating reforms since more than a decade²⁸, “Since last two decades I have been advocating that Ulama should be linked to the mainstream education. Now Bridge course is offering a ray of hope that should be accepted and world of opportunities it offers should be grabbed at an earnest. Bridge course certainly is opening new vistas that offer unique opportunities to help students join the mainstream education and earn laurels with their hard work and consistency. The madrasa

²⁶ Asghar Ali Engineer Interview, *Madrasa Reforms: Indian Muslim Voices*, compiled by Yoginder Sikander, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (VAK), Mumbai, 2008, P-83-84.

²⁷ Ibid, P-89-90.

²⁸ Dr Waris Mazhari, *Hindustani Madaris Ka Taleemi Nizam aur is Mey Islah Ki Zaroorat: Ek Jayiza*, Global Media Publication, New Delhi, 2014.

students have this advantage that they are groomed for hard work and certainly as the Bridge course students are manifesting with their hard work that they can crack any competitive exams. These students will represent Islam in all the fields where they will be admitted for higher education”.



When asked about the threat of madrasa students losing their identity and being of little use to Muslim community, Mazhari was aghast and cited, “To represent Islam and spread its message it is essential to join modern institutions particularly education. The founders of Deoband Maulana Qasim Nanantawi and Rasheed Ahmad Gangohi both studied at the British established Delhi college, despite that they established Darul Uloom deoband. A little risk of the madrasa students going astray can be there, but that certainly does not mean we should boycott such educational institutions. Further most of the children of administrators and faculty members of madaris are studying in Christian missionary schools, so don’t they understand the vulnerability of their children being at risk or the risk is just reserved for the poor madrasa students, who are being stopped from receiving modern education by raising a false bandwagon of Islam being under threat”.

Atiq ur Rahman, who runs Deoband Institute of Islamic Thought (DIIT) and is an independent scholar²⁹ who does not support the inclusion of modern subjects in the madrasa curriculum, “Modern methodology instead of subjects should be incorporated, including English language.

²⁹ Atif Suhail Siddiqui, *Life and Thoughts of Hujjat al Islam: Imam Muhammad Qasim al Nanatawi*, Deoband Institute of Islamic Thought, 2016.

The influential madrasas like Deoband can sign memorandum of understanding with universities like International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) for student exchange. They can cooperate on various issues. When asked about his opposition to the inclusion of modern subjects in the curriculum, Atiq cited both internal and external reasons. “The madrasas mostly emphasize on school of thought, instead of Islam having an upperhand, so it will be quite difficult for them to incorporate any change. Further, the reformist voices mostly are not sincere, they want to turn masses against the Ulama. The madrasas are our bastions, castles that have not let our identity be diluted and All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) that is extension of madrasa has helped protect our legal rights. Even as Muslims in India are weak they still have helped to uphold our distinct identity”. Atiq further added that, “Specialized courses or modern subjects can be introduced or included once the degree is complete”. This stance makes him support the Bridge course initiative though not completely because of the apprehension of madrasa students losing their identity and Rashid Shaz being a man of controversial views can dilute the minds of students about various principles of Islam that have been adhered to with consensus since many centuries.



Preliminary Findings

Most of the personalities interviewed are not directly associated with madrasas, but have an active role in the Muslim community are certainly appreciative of the efforts of Bridge course, which according to them has opened new vistas for the madrasa students. They are optimistic about its future and not so critical of its present Director, Rashid Shaz. Also there are some reformist voices like Maulana Sultan Ahmad Islahi and Dr Waris Mazhari who despite being madrasa products are quite critical of the curriculum and pedagogical practices prevalent in contemporary madrasa system as is evident from their Urdu works on madrasas and the need for change. Few voices are still there who do not like to witness Dr Rashid Shaz as the director of the course. Others certainly are able to distinguish Rashid Shaz as a scholar and an administrator. One scholar among the interviewees who had read his complete works pointed out the fact, “In his (Rashid Shaz’s) personality we witness an evolution, who at one juncture supported the establishment of caliphate and now has quite a liberal attitude towards most issues”. But at the same time he was quite critical of such distinct, extreme and variant side of his personality.

Bridge course certainly is documenting a new history, but as has been experienced every new change is accepted with a lot of opposition and reluctance. Bridge course initiative is no exception to this fact. The Bridge course education certainly finds an echo in writings of some Ulama, who genuinely support the idea. “There is a silent process going on, which may be called ‘out of campus education’, students of madrasas find that outside the madrasa campus, there is a widespread system of secular education. After completing madrasa education, students are joining these institutions in great numbers. Thus the out of campus system of education is providing a complementary role in this regard.”³⁰ This out of campus education is manifested at its zenith through bridge course. In the coming decade Bridge course would be the first choice of madrasa students after the completion of traditional madrasa education.



³⁰ Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *The True Face of Islam*, compiled and edited by Raamish Siddiqui, Harper Element, India, 2015, P-100.

The Vehement Opposition: Perspectives of Madrasas

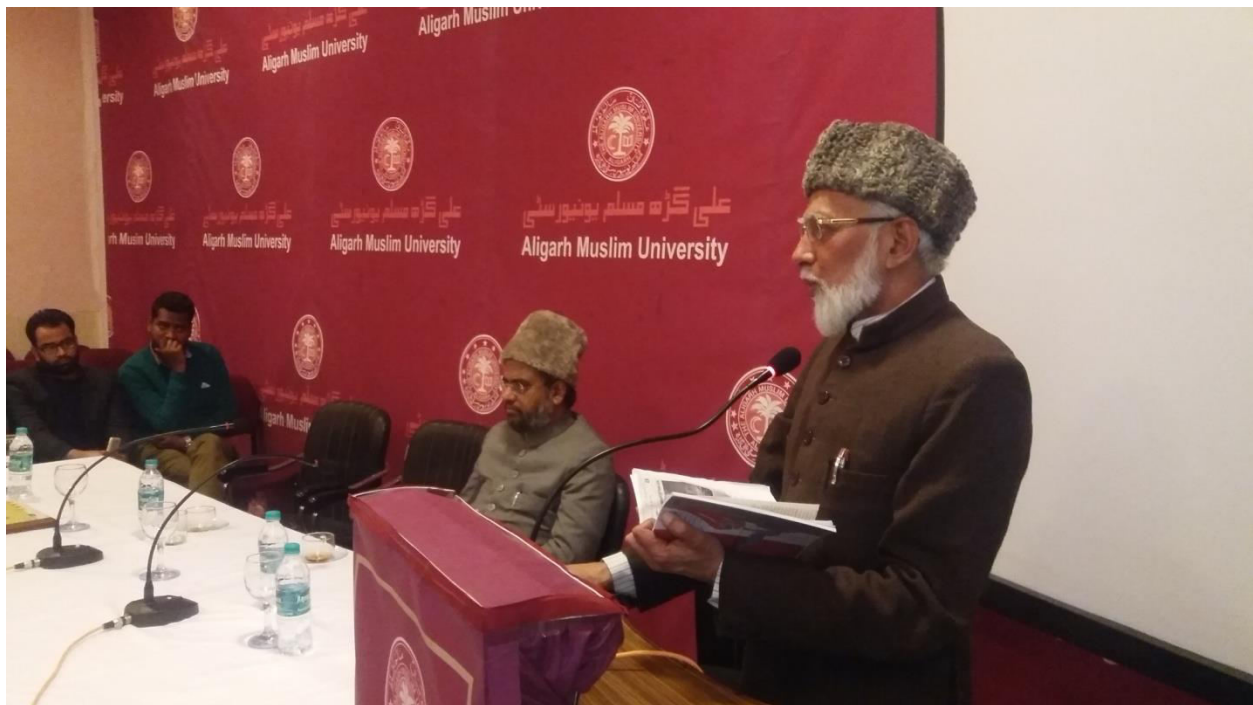
Madrasas owing to their anti colonial establishment, role in anti imperialism, antagonism towards anything related to West, rigid stance towards change, have not evolved or outgrown their traditional outlook, principles or ideology based more on their maslaks than Islam. Madrasas have been stagnant in the fast changing world around them. It is not to debunk them as retrograde who have closed themselves to all the fruits of science and technology. Most of the madrasa stalwarts have top brands of cell phones, sedan vehicles, gen next laptops, ipads and tablets but certainly at ideological level they still consider West, its system of education and inclusion of its subjects in the newly constructed 'sacred structure' of Dars e Nizami something akin to blasphemy. The voices asking for reform are quite old. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, one of the stalwarts of Indian National Congress and Islamic scholar of repute as early as February 1947 convened a meeting in Lucknow, which was attended by the representatives of all leading madrasas in which he appealed to the madrasa representatives to be "sensitive and responsive to the demands of the age and retrofit their curriculum by including the modern sciences. The failure to do so would only aggravate the clash between progress and conservatives and history showed that conservatism could not hope to succeed in this struggle".³¹



³¹ Quoted in Arif Mohammed Khan, *Text and Context: Quran and Contemporary Challenges*, Rupa Publication, New Delhi, India, 2010, P-7.

This sane voice remained unheeded and history has proved Maulana Azad's surmise and prediction quite right. The madrasas still have not opened their doors to the new subjects because for them

- “1. Western culture and Indian philosophy weaken Islam and therefore no such subjects should be introduced
2. If any modern subject is taught at all it should be Islamised first
3. It is better to give Islamic education to Muslim children who are studying in modern schools than to give modern education to madrasa students”³²



Despite this background it was essential to document the views from the madrasas, as it were their pass out students who are being admitted in the course. So it became inevitable to ignore their voices. I first visited Darul Uloom Deoband, the fountainhead of madrasas in South Asia. I met the chief administrator or Vice Chancellor (Muhtamim) of Darul Uloom, Deoband. It was a surprise for me that Deoband has been divided.³³ Mufti Abdul Qasim Noamani intimated me that he was not aware about the Bridge course, thus not in a position to talk about it. He directed me to meet Muhammad Khalil Qasimi who heads the Media department at Darul Uloom, Deoband. Khalil Qasimi stated that, “Madrasas do not teach or inculcate sectarianism. Also we do not have

³² *Mulk wa Millat Ki Tameer Aur Dini Madaris*, Idara Ilmia, Balariaganj, Azamgarh, 1994. The above noted points are the crux of argument of most papers compiled in this book.

³³ Dietrich Reetz, *Change and Stagnation in Islamic Education: The Darul Uloom of Deoband after Split in 1982* in Farish A Noor, Yoginder Sikander & Martin Van Bruinessen (eds), *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, Amsterdam University Press, 2008, P-71-104.

time to teach modern subjects within Dars e Nizami curriculum, as the primary aim of the curriculum is to make its students best Islamic scholars. We did introduce few subjects but we cannot overhaul the curriculum overnight. If you are aware of the fact that over the past century Dars e Nizami curriculum has not remained the same. Many books have been added and some deleted. We also teach secular subjects like grammar, Arabic language and literature, Greek logic, history, geography, rhetoric and so on. So it certainly will take time for a change in curriculum but that should not impact the identity of madrasas or its products the students, because madrasas are the only institutions that have kept the indigenous Muslim identity alive”.

When asked about his perception regarding Bridge course, Qasimi stated that, “There is nothing wrong per se with the Bridge course but Rashid Shaz who has different antagonistic views as compared to most Ulama is misusing the course to brainwash madrasas children. He wants to impose his own views on tender minds, thus using them as a vehicle for promotion of his own opinions as their impact of far reaching than common people. The course can continue but the present director should go”, concluded Qasimi



Another teacher at Deoband Muhammad Khaliq Madrasi, sounded positive about Bridge course, but had similar reservations about Dr Rashid Shaz. “English education is fine, but it certainly cannot be incorporated within the ambit of Dars e Nizami, because it will overburden the students. The Bridge course is fine as it does acquaint madrasa students with new streams of knowledge but what reports are coming out from the Bridge course and AMU are quite anti

thetical to the principles of knowledge. Rashid Shaz has an unsteady past and even now his views are far from the consensus of the Ummah”.

The next stop was Darul Uloom Deoband (Wakf) where Maulana Shamshad gave me a detailed interview. “There is no distinction between knowledge. The division of knowledge between secular and religious is unnatural. The real issue is of intention of a student. If he/she acquires knowledge for serving Allah’s cause then it is Islamic and if a student seeks religious knowledge for worldly materialistic pursuits then it is worldly. If the aim of gaining knowledge is good, then it is religious”. When enquired why the curriculum does not include English and allied subjects Maulana Shamshad stated, “We are not against learning English³⁴ but English culture. If we make English mandatory then students cannot become specialists of religious sciences. Once they complete madrasa education they are free to seek education. So bridge course in that sense is doing a great service to madras students. We encourage our students to go for higher education in modern social sciences, but at the same time we have every reason to differ with Rashid Shaz’s views though what he is doing is commendable”.



Dr Maulana Shakeeb Qasimi, Director Hujjat Ul Islam Qasim Shah Nanatawi Research Academy center at Darul Uloom Wakf states that, “We have long back included the modern

³⁴ Urdu is the language of instruction in most madrasas of South Asia including India. Plus madrasas are described among the last bastions where Urdu has sought refuge. Tauqeer Rahi, *Urdu Nisaab aur Madaris: Ek Mushidati wa Tajrubati Mutala*, Brown Book Publishing House, New Delhi, 2012.



learning in our institution. The student can take a specialized course in comparative religious studies, journalism, Arabic language after his education is over. But the problem is that government is not recognizing our degrees. Certainly government should consider us literate upto the standards enshrined in the constitution for being literate that include reading, writing and understanding a language”. When enquired about the Bridge course Dr Shakeeb stated, “Bridge course is similar to the specialized courses that we run through our institution, with the stark difference that our courses do not get the recognition from government. Further Rashid Shaz is deviated as per his views regarding various issues related to Islam and his views are getting a bigger platform through Bridge course thus it has now become problematic”. Maulana Ahmad Khizir who is the head department of Hadith could not be contacted regarding his opinion about Bridge course.

Next visit to Mazahir Ul Uloom, Saharanpur that has been established at the same time as Darul Uloom Deoband, 1866. Like Darul Uloom Deoband Mazahirul Uloom too has been divided too into Mazhir ul Uloom and Mazahir ul Uloom (Wakf).³⁵ Both are claiming to be the real inheritors of legacy of its founders. Maulana Shahid who is the secretary of Mazahir ul Uloom was quite reluctant to talk about Bridge course, but ultimately spoke that “Bridge course we are not aware about its niceties of this particular course but yes Rashid Shaz is a deviated soul, who is demolishing the institutions and edifice of Islam by making people hate the Ulama. He is a lone voice who has no contenders, now with the help of this course he is trying to spread deviated ideas among the students, who just have completed their studies and are not aware of the ideology and its underpinnings that has been wrongly camouflaged as Islamic”. Also Moulvi Mawiya Saeed has been vociferous critic of Rashid Shaz sometimes his criticism knows no

³⁵ Maulana Syed Muhammad Shahid Saharanpuri, *Majlis Shura Sarparastaan Jamia Mazahir Uloom Saharanpur: Waqiyaat aur Nazir ki Roshni Mey*, Maktaba e Yaadgaar e Sheikh, Saharanpur, India, 2002. Documenting around eight decades of history and important events of madrasa Mazahir ul Uloom that includes its division too.

boundaries and infringes on character assassination is a teacher at Mazahir ul Uloom, but he could not be contacted for understanding the reasons of his vendetta against bridge course and personality of Rashid Shaz.

“What are you researching about madrasa reforms or you have been sent by Rashid Shaz to get our support for the Bridge course?” were a volley of questions charged at me by Mufti Rashid of Mazahir Ul Uloom (Wakf). I pacified him about my credentials and purpose of study, only then he was ready to answer my queries “Madrasas since their establishment have maintained their identity and independent stature. Now attempts are being made to curb the autonomy of madrasas and we are resisting such attempts like madrasa board.³⁶ Learning new things or acquiring a new language is not abhorred but who will guarantee the fact that madrasa students will not be lost in the materialistic pursuit of the world like those who are getting educated in colleges and universities. Later they turn corrupt and have little sympathy left for the cause of Islam. Bridge course and its working, I am not the suitable person to comment about but certainly Rashid Shaz is a controversial personality whose writings mostly are to debunk and debase Ulama. There are high chances that the students might get influenced by his thoughts and retrograde towards deviation like him”, Rashid concluded.

Mufti Rashid’s statement echoed similar apprehension as that of Mahmudul Hasan Deobandi who in his inauguration speech at Jamia Millia Islamia on 29th October, 1920 stated, “Those amongst you who are well informed will know that I have never given a religious decree (fatwa) declaring the study of a foreign language or of the sciences and arts of other nations as *Kufr* (unbelief). But I state categorically that the final impact of English education in our view is that people are influenced by (dyed in the color of Christianity) or mock and abuse their religion and their co religionists with atheist taunts or begin to worship government of the day. It is right for a Muslim to stay aloof from such education”.



³⁶ The independence of madrasas having a distinct identity was emphasized time and again. Thus to maintain the same they should avoid accepting government grants or collaborating with them. It is also echoed in Mufti Muhammad Salam Mansurpuri, *Lamhaat e Fikria*, Islahi book depot, Lal Masjid, Deoband, 2005, P-212-219.



These apprehensions certainly have been proved quite incorrect over the century but still the mindset and worldview of madrasa stalwarts is influenced by the same. Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow is another pioneering madrasa, though supposed to combine the modern and traditional system of education, which it tried in the earlier stages but ultimately it also retrograded and now functions with superfluous modernity³⁷. A known name of Nadwatul Ulama (hereafter Nadwa) was Maulana Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi popularly known as Ali Miya. He has time and again described the ‘flaws of modern education’ and how they need to be rectified. In his conception like that of earlier Muslim revivalists including Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) and Syed Qutb (1906-1966) west is a monolith and everything coming from it certainly needs to be discarded or vehemently opposed or completely reformed.

So Western education too needs to be reformed only then will it be acceptable to the Muslim Ulama.³⁸ Further any change howsoever positive is looked with suspicion. The Ulama and their coteries have come out with full fledged rebuttals against sans reforms in madrasas.³⁹ Though there are instances in history when integration of traditional and modern education was

³⁷ Maulana Muhammad Ishaq Jalees Nadwi, *Tareekh Nadwatul Ulama, Part I*, Majlis Sihafat wa Nashriyat, Nadwatul Ulama, Lucknow, 2014 and Maulana Dr Shams Tabrez Khan, *Tareekh Nadwatul Ulama, Part II*, Majlis Sihafat wa Nashriyat, Nadwatul Ulama, Lucknow, 2015. Both the volumes document the Nadwa history till 1960s and now more than five decades have elapsed but no substantial work has been produced that can give a researcher an insight into the thinking and working strategy of its administrators and stalwarts regarding a host of issues including changes in curriculum and introduction of new subjects.

³⁸ Maulana Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Nizam e Taleem: Magribi Ruhjanaan aur Iss Mey Tabdili Ki Zaroorat*, Syed Ahmad Shahid Academy, Rai Bareilly, India, 2012.

³⁹ The book penned down by Dr Muhammad Yasin Qasimi, *Madaris Islamia Aur Jadeed Qari Kye Tasawuraat*, Brown Book publications, New Delhi, 2014 is a testimony of such a rebuttal.

attempted. It was experimented with by the famous Arab reformer Shaikh Tahir Al Jaziri of Syria who was the torch bearer of this trend. During the rein of Governor Midhat Pasha he had established a society called Al Jamia al Khairiyah al Insha al Madaris under which he had established thirty madrasas which helped preserve rich Islamic heritage and also taught modern subjects to students.⁴⁰

At Nadwa I first of all tried to fix a meeting with its chief administrator and vice chancellor Maulana Rabey Hussaini Nadwi, but citing to his ill health I was not granted the appointment. Then I went to interview Maulana Salman Nadwi, whose polemical diatribes and rebuttal books have been in my reading list for a long time. He is also a leading voice for reforms in madrasa curriculum and inclusion of modern subjects.⁴¹ I went to meet him with a lot of hopes and aspirations. As soon as he saw the certificate of validation, that described me as a researcher who is gathering information about the impact of Bridge course, his tone changed. He was reluctant to talk and made himself busy in calling out his personal assistant time and again, while answering my questions in bits and pieces, that too quite vaguely. That made me uneasy and it was what Maulana desired that I leave his office as soon as possible. When I still insisted on asking questions related to Bridge course and the madrasa students acquiring new skills related to other subjects, he concluded, “It is not good and we do not know what is right and wrong”. I left after thanking him for his time, but certainly experienced a different Maulana Salman as I had discovered him through his books and speeches, wherein he talks about unity of Ummah and here he was not ready to tolerate me for few minutes. Later I learnt the fact that Salman Nadwi is direly opposed to Rashid Shaz and his thought. Now when such a big responsibility of Bridge course has been assigned to Prof. Shaz, the campaign of vilification has retrograded into a hateful tirade against Bridge course. Salman Nadwi in his books writes about the change in curriculum and madrasa reforms, but the madrasa Syed Ahmad Shaheed that he established is no different from the predecessors.



⁴⁰ Uzma Naheed, *Traditional Madrasas: Deoband and its Inspiration* in Tahir mahmood (ed) *Politics of Minority Educational Institutions: Law and Reality in the subcontinent*, Imprint one, Gurgaon, Haryana , 2007, P-184-185.

⁴¹ Syed Salman Hussaini Nadwi, *Hamara Nisab e Taleem Kya Ho?* Jamia Syed Ahmad Shaheed, Malehabad, Lucknow, 2004.

I further met Maulana Nazar Ul Hafiz Nadwi, who unlike Salman Nadwi resorted to criticism of Rashid Shaz, his written works and bridge course. He stated that, “Rashid Shaz is influencing students through his thought process and influencing them to stand against the Ulama”. When I further enquired from Maulana Nazar whether he has visited Bridge course interacted with some of its students and witnessed that Rashid Shaz is training them to stand against Ulama and disrespect them, he could not answer that poignantly but intimated me that his works are clear manifestation of his thought that is against our forefathers.

I further asked him about his views regarding Bridge course, neither did he neither appreciate nor condemned it but once again the discussion revolved around Rashid Shaz. At last I met Maulana Hifz ur Rahman who seemed quite positive about the Bridge course. “Islam needs new votaries who can take its message to different corners of the world. For reaching out to various people settled in different lands, we need to learn languages of varied hues, particularly English that has now got a universal sanctity, that makes it indispensable for *Daees* of Islam to master”, he stated.

Maulana Rahman further opined that we should not outrightly discard any new initiative. “Bridge course is new development; we should not vehemently oppose it without experiencing its pros and cons. Once the positives or shortcomings of the course have been vouchsafed only then can a mature opinion be articulated. At this infancy stage it needs to be given a space to function”, he concluded. Madrasa should include the modern subjects in a modest manner, not on a large scale as they cannot afford it. The inclusion should be like religious subjects are taught in a school for an hour or so, instead of be allocated to modern subjects in madrasas.⁴²

Next I went to one of the biggest girls Madrasa in India Jamiat ul Salihaat, Rampur, but I was not successful for securing an appointment with any teacher or administrator as they were busy with conducting the exams. But certainly the syllabus of girl’s madrasa like Jamiat ul Salihaat is different because women are supposed to have different capabilities thus they need differential treatment. Further only few girls are supposed to go for higher education or Ifta (Juristic knowledge) that will allow them to issue Fatwas⁴³. Women are supposed to stay at home, raise a family and help the man in looking after his children. The whole corpus of religious literature produced about women just deals with their duties with few focusing on their rights. Most of the literature produced about women just deals with their duties with little focus on their rights. Most of the literature is advisory in nature that is heavily influenced by social context and patriarchy.⁴⁴

⁴² Maulana Syed Jalaluddin Umari, *Deeni Uloom Ki Tadrees: Hindustan Key Madaris Ka Nisab aur Iski Khasusiyat*, Markazi Maktaba Islami, Publishers, Jamia Nagar, Delhi, 2009, P-16.

⁴³ Mareike Jule Winkelmann, *Reading the minds of young Muslim women: Girls Madrasa in India*, Hope India Publications, Gurgaon, India, 2007. The ethnographic study of a girl’s madrasa can be generalized for most of them with certain exceptions.

⁴⁴ One example of such piece of advisory religious literature is that of *Bihisti Zewar* written by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi who was one of the stalwarts of Darul Uloom, Deoband. This book was for a long time given with dowry for young brides to understand their duties towards their husbands and family.

Women in India still face numerous problems particularly they are among the least educated sections of our society. Religious education instead of empowering them has further reinforced patriarchy, giving it a religious tinge, thus reinforcing their disempowerment.⁴⁵ In the Indian patriarchal culture where a woman is treated as a second class inferior citizen whose only purpose of life is to satisfy the carnal desires of her husband, raise the children and look after his household. She is being praised for her selfless household activities and dedication towards her husband. Her salvation in the hereafter depends on how happy her husband is with her services. Any disobedience is treated as sin. She is doomed to raging fires of hell if her husband is unhappy with her. The disobedience of her husband is equal to disobedience to creator. The misogynist Hadith wrongly attributed to Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) try to reinforce this mindset. The patriarchal mindset wants to demean the status of women by stating that “if Prostration was allowed for anyone other than Allah then it would have been allowed for a wife to prostrate before her husband”. Also another misogynist Hadith states that, “If a husband is angry with his wife, Allah doesn’t listen to her prayers”. Also another Hadith that tries to reinforce the upper hand of husbands by stating that, “If a husband doesn’t permit his wife to fast, she shouldn’t keep the non obligatory fasts”. When the patriarchy and misogyny is inculcated and camouflaged in religious terms then obedience and submission becomes a religious duty that few women would dare to oppose. Islam, Quran and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) gave revolutionary rights to women that were snatched by Muslim men over centuries. Madrasas instead of empowering Muslim women have further helped in reinforcing patriarchy and misogyny.



⁴⁵ Juhi Gupta, *The Future of Indian Muslim Women: Fatwa versus Feminism*, Readworthy Publication, New Delhi, 2010.

Preliminary findings

Madrasas and Ulama associated with it overall have not been able to change their outlook and social context in which they were first established in Indian subcontinent. They still believe that Islam is under siege and they are the castles and bastions of belief. They still believe that those talking about reforms in madrasas want to break the relation between madrasas and muslims, by degrading its status in the eyes of common muslims.⁴⁶ The conspiracy against Muslims and Islamophobia cannot be brushed aside, but madrasas instead of reaching out to masses have closed down options of even interacting with society, as in most madrasas even newspaper reading is curtailed.

Madrasa cadres and traditional Ulama have not been able to present a positive picture of Islam, instead they are always in news for wrong reasons whether related to Muslim Personal Law, Triple Talaq, polygamy and Purdah. These issues and the stance madrasas have taken has led to the construction of Islam as misogynist, chauvinistic, exclusivist, radical and extremist religion which is not ready to inculcate change with change in environment and conditions. The Shariah as a problem solving methodology rather than law that is meant to be dynamic, universal and adjusting to change has been lost.⁴⁷

The Ulama believe that madrasas are helping stop unemployment because its alumnus does not demand government jobs or compete for it.⁴⁸ The Ulama are so naïve to understand the fact that their degrees, education and curriculum are not recognized by the government, so how come they will be even eligible for the government posts? Bridge course is offering a window of opportunities to the madrasa students but the Ulama do not want them to avail it. They have the apprehension that Dr Rashid Shaz will ‘deviate’ them from what they conceive as true Islam. But here the question arises that if the madrasa students who after completing their education and leave madrasas trained as Ulama or Muftis if they are so vulnerable to deviation from few lectures and tutelage of Dr Shaz, then there is something inherently flawed and wrong in the madrasa curriculum and pedagogy.

Further on the basis of hearsay the Ulama have started a campaign of vilification against Bridge course. They have failed to understand that Rashid Shaz is supposed to just direct the course, not impose his worldview on students. Bridge course is not Rashid Shaz’s brainchild nor is it a platform granted to him to propagate his views that are controversial for Ulama. There is a mixed policy and reaction of Ulama and functionaries of madrasas towards Bridge course. Some do support it while others are opposed to it. The misconceptions are more due to ignorance about the course. If the Ulama are better exposed about the curriculum of Bridge course and invited to visit the classes the differences are bound to reduce. It will certainly take time for the

⁴⁶ Maulana Abdul Hamid Noamani, *Khuwandgi Muhim aur Madaris*, Aalami Sahari, 14 July, 2012, P-3.

⁴⁷ Ziauddin Sardar, *Breaking the Monolith*, Imprint one, Gurgaon, India, 2008, espouses Shariah as a problem solving mechanism.

⁴⁸ Sadiq Raza Misbahi, *Mulk Par Bhoj Nahi Fuzlae Madaris*, Aalami Sahara, 14 July, 2012, P-29.

misconceptions, criticism and opposition to die down, when the bridge course initiative will become a positive productive entitlement and best resource of leadership for Indian Muslims.

Some Ulama I had found were apprehensive of the fact, that once the young Ulama through Bridge course become empowered, they will certainly question their authority, interpretation of Islam and pedagogical practices in which raising questions is discouraged; instead the dictates of the teacher are accepted as gospel truth. So they are worried that the false clout and fabricated charisma they have woven around their personalities endearing them god men will be shattered in a single stroke. They are more concerned about their loss of status and stature, instead of empowerment of Muslim masses or even Ulama in general. Some students of madrasas whom I talked to seemed excited about bridge course. They intended to join it once their madrasa education is over.



Ear to the Ground: Bridge Course Students

The most important voices that need to be documented were that of Bridge course students, who are the real stakeholders of this initiative. It is because of their participation that the course is running successfully. I had the privilege of spending a fortnight with students of Bridge course, witnessing their daily routine, understanding their perspectives, future goals, ambitions and impact of Bridge course on their lives. I had the opportunity to talk to scores of them at length over the weeks, both current and pass out students. I could garner different insights from them related to Bridge course, its curriculum, faculty and the Director Prof. Rashid Shaz who seemed in the midst of ‘controversy’ for his different views. It was earlier alleged that Prof. Shaz has used Bridge course as a platform and launchpad of his views for brainwashing the tender minds of the madrasa students.

Mahmood Qasimi who has completed his Fazeelat from Deoband Wakf, intimated me that Bridge course has opened up new vistas for him particularly the English language developing and learning skills is indeed a treat. But he was critical of the intra faith classes as he stated, “It should be there but what I experienced is that on stage everyone speaks positively about the need of intra faith but beyond it in their personal lives they follow the sectarianism”. Muhammad Salam Qasmi is the participant of third batch of Bridge course, who has completed his Fazeelat from Darul Uloom Deoband. He describes his experience of Bridge course as, “We witnessed the bridge course in a better developed phase than our previous senior batch mates. The English and computer learning skills really empower a student. Further the inter and intra faith classes are really very great. They are the real essence of Bridge course. The exclusive rigidity among us, developed over time through the sectarian reading of Islam diluted to a large extent. The common classes and shared living helped us understand each other better”.

Maulana Abdul Rahim belongs to Rajouri, Jammu and has memorized the Holy Quran in a madrasa based in Gujarat. Later he has completed his Alimiyat from Nadwatul Ulama, and now is undertaking his bachelors honors in English. He describes his journey through bridge course as quite enlightening and different than Nadwa that is still considered as a modern madrasa in most traditional circles. “The pedagogical practice still prevalent in Nadwa has been a product of colonial era, there is no session like holding debates or free hour for raising questions. During bridge course we had the opportunity to talk across different sects, build friendships and understand each other. Earlier it was unknown to us during our madrasa studies. Through bridge course sessions we came to understand West in better terms, the secret of their progress being technology. Earlier we were just aware of the fact that only vulgarity, nudity and same sex relationships exist in West only”.

“My biggest hope of learning English and being able to use computers was fulfilled through Bridge course. I am now undertaking my B.A honors in Economics though I aimed to be a doctor but science subjects are not being taught in Bridge course. I had some exposure of math and science at Madrasatul Islah where these subjects were taught through Urdu medium”, stated

Atif Jawed of Azamgarh. He further opined that, “Bridge course also made me experience the joint learning through co education. It was indeed a novel experience and later on it was quite fruitful as earlier I was reluctant to talk to girl classmates”.

During my conversations with Bridge course students this opinion was time and again articulated that science subjects should be introduced so that students would be eligible for professional courses in medicine, pharmacy and engineering. But due to various reasons the science subjects were introduced but the experiment failed to take off because of various reasons including the short span of time allocated for bridge course. There are now efforts on to increase the time span of the course for two years, only then justice can be done with science subjects. Also the co-education has now been stopped because there is an increase in the intake capacity of students so separate classes are held both for girls and boys.

Abdullah Siddiqui, Israr Ali and Ghulam Ghaus have completed their theological degrees from Jamiah Aarifah, Allahabad. They have different aims like becoming a doctor, teacher and civil servant. They all are for praise for the bridge course initiative that granted them the opportunity to be acquainted with the modern streams of knowledge. “Some teachers should be changed, as they are monotonous. We also need better infrastructure of living. Further Shia students also need to be included in Bridge course and discussions about Shias introduced in Intra Faith dialogue too because we know quite little about Shias even if we have read for decades the religious theology and sciences”.



It is true that very little information is included about Shias in madrasas. Mostly polemical and refuting texts are written against them. Madrasa students are trained in such a manner that they

should refute Shia doctrines as they are described as those who have deviated from the straight path.⁴⁹ Hussain Syed who has completed his Hifz and Alimiyat from Jamiah Aarfiya and is now undertaking B.A honors in English is quite critical of few aspects of Bridge course like Intra Faith dialogue that according to him did not help in reducing the differences. “The differences continued to exist. The intra faith lectures did not help in bringing students together, but living together did help reduce some misconceptions about each other. Further the frequent change of teachers did hamper the smooth working of classes. Also the non introduction of science subjects in Bridge course left many with shattered dreams”, he concluded.

“I was never exposed to co-education before, but here at first I found it quite difficult to cope up with this new phenomenon but later on I came to accept this positive change”, stated Tanveer Ahmad who has been exposed to the streams of knowledge both at Darul Uloom Deoband and Nadwa. He is now a bachelor’s student at AMU. He further states that, “At abstract level we all Muslims are equal but practically we are a divided house, with slogans of Ummah being an empty rhetoric. The intra faith class further reinforced our belief about abstract level of equality and unity, but practical steps like praying behind each other still remained a dream that yet needs to be realized”.



⁴⁹ Mufti Mahmood Nadeem Qasimi, *Jadid Taleem Aur Dini Madaris* in Syed Sajid Ali Tonki (ed), *Jadeed Taleem Aur Hamarey Madaris*, Madrasatul Nisa Tonk, Rajasthan, 1997, P-47.

Muhammad Irshad who completed his Alimiyat from Nadwa, after completing his bridge course too now is studying to complete his bachelors shared a critical experience of Bridge course, “More focus was given on English while relegating the other subjects to periphery. Further more emphasis was laid on passing the entrance examination that will help us secure a seat in the bachelor’s admission of various streams of social sciences. The teaching of other subjects is quite brief that has a scope of being broadened”.

Muhammad Akeel Akhter earlier has completed his Alimiyat from Jamiah Aarifiah, Allahabad and now currently enrolled as a student of Bachelors in Psychology at AMU. “Bridge course experience was certainly a revolutionary and life changing one. To be acquainted with university environment was both a treat and challenge. Rashid Shaz sir, helped in making us understand various issues and challenges facing the Muslim world. He broadened our horizons of thinking by empowering us with tools of critical observation and analysis. The intra and inter faith classes did not help us better understand each other and ourselves but living together did. The co-education experience was as simple as travelling in the same bus because we did not interact with each other on personal level. Co-education is beneficial only when girls play an active role in interaction too. The West as we had earlier known being an enemy only, now we understand the fact that it has positive aspects too”.

“Rashid Shaz wanted us to believe that West and Muslims can cooperate. He in his right intentions want to unite Muslims, so there is a nice attempt to achieve these goals through intra and inter faith sessions. But sects do exist and we can witness that in our societies where there are no systematic lectures about inter and intra faith, people do co exist, because tolerance is the key to co existence”, opined Syed ur Rahman who has completed his Alimiyat from Nadwa. Syed is all praise for Bridge course but critical too. “There should be a strict organized and systematic following of time table while running the bridge course. At present it looks hotch potch. Further for students like me it is being exposed to a new environment in a university with co-education, so few days should be open days where we are exposed to the new life, rules and university atmosphere”.

Muhammad Ilyas who has completed his degree from Jamiat ul Falah, Azamgarh, is all praise for the Bridge course that has opened up a world of opportunities for them. Earlier they had a limited scope of being confined just to the masjids or madrasas, but now they can avail new opportunities that Bridge course offers them. Though he stated that much emphasis is given to English language and literature sometimes at the cost of other subjects, he found that Bridge course is “balanced but the syllabus needs to be systematic, with permanent teachers available to teach them instead of changing the subject teachers time and again”.

“The duration of Bridge course should be increased to two years, with inclusion of science subjects. The strength of the course lies in its emphasis on English language that makes the student empowered only in a year to understand and comprehend the language. The time frame of madrasa education is so long that we are not able to acquire other skills, but bridge course

helps us achieve many feats in a short span of time”, says Muhammad Sarfaraz Ahmad who is undertaking his bachelor in English literature. But he is critical of the intra faith classes that according to him generate more heat than light.

“Bridge course is indeed a great platform for the madrasa students to get empowered. The madrasa candidates are quite afraid of the university environment but Bridge course certainly bestows them with proper skills that help them adjust and get acquainted with the new environment”. Further the intra faith discussions help us come out of sectarian outlook and understand the different sects quite better. Also the co-education helps to understand the perspectives of the other gender much more distinctly. Earlier we held the West as being quite antagonistic to Islam and Muslims but now we look at them from a changed perspective thanks to the critical thinking tools that we acquired during our journey at the Bridge course”, Abdul Khaliq a Bridge course alumnus.

“Textbooks should be drafted for the Bridge course students. The classes are very systematic, both teachers and students work very hard. But the evaluation of students through assignments and exams can be improved further. In Bridge course as compared to the madrasa learning there is no emphasis on sectarian reading of Islam, instead we are taught to think and analyze critically various issues related to Muslim world, West and Women. It certainly has opened up new world of thought before us that was earlier quite unknown to us all”, states Mohammad Afan and Mohammad Marwan who have completed their Fazeelat from Jamia Siraj ul Uloom, Baudishar.



Aleena Shamim completed her Fazeelat and Aalmiat from Jamiat ul Salihaat, Rampur and is one of the brightest students of Bridge course confided, “We faced numerous problems in the initial phase, adapting to new environment particularly with boys around us was something unknown. But with time we gelled up quite well. The English language classes, the interactions with our teachers and general discussions helped break the ice. Further we used to emphasize on Maslak

now our belief on real tenants of Islam that does not encourage sectarianism has been a positive development. We were not aware that women have the capability to play a lead role in Muslim world and confront the challenges facing Muslim world head on. The curriculum of madrasas is too narrow with little knowledge being shared about the contemporary issues but bridge course helped us compensate those flaws. We are indeed lucky to have discovered a new world altogether through Bridge course”.

“On the basis of ignorance we used to hate each other and had developed a lot of misconceptions but Bridge course helped us understand that there were different ways to understand the facts. The reinforced rigidity was diluted indeed. We had wrong misconceptions about West as developed by reading religious journals and newspapers but now we can certainly understand that not everything with West is wrong, but values like Justice, rule of law and equality are prevalent there too”, opines Mohiuddin Meo, who has completed his Alimiyat from Jamia Darulsalam, Tamil Nadu.

“Proper counseling of students after the bridge course should be an inevitable part, because even after completing the course students are not aware of the subjects to choose from and are confused about their future course of studies. Preparation for professional courses should be included too, plus such academic arrangement should be executed that students are able to choose from commerce subjects too”, says Nehal Ahmad Nadwi. Nehal further says that after attending the Bridge course he is now sure that Islam and West can certainly co-exist with each other.

Muhammad Bilal Ashdaq has completed his Alimiyat from Jamiah Arabiya, Bundelkhand and now is undertaking his bachelor in Psychology. He is highly appreciative of the bridge course and is hopeful that it will have many branches from which madrasa students like him can be benefitted. “Bridge course offered us a unique opportunity to understand the West, different schools of thoughts among Muslims, the perspectives of west and gender. It empowered us to write and articulate our views. I would recommend this course to all. This course is a unique gift to us all but can be further improved by inculcating strict discipline as well as holding exams every two months that will help to better prepare and revise things”, Ashdaq concluded.

“Bridge course should not retrograde to a coaching center, where students are just taught to crack the entrance exams to secure their place in different courses. The rat race should not focus on just cracking exams but undertaking a life long journey of learning modern streams of knowledge. It is what Bridge course really aims at”, are the views articulated by Imtiyaz Shamim who is currently a student of B.A English.

Muhammad Arshi Alam has completed his Alimiyat from Nadwa and now currently enrolled as a bachelors student of political science is vociferously critical of the manner through which Bridge course is being conducted, “Personally the course has not been of great help to me accept for securing 10+2 certificate because much emphasis was laid on English language retrograding

social sciences into oblivion. The testimony of this fact being that only last twenty days were allocated to teaching of social sciences during the whole academic year. There is a dire need of improvement in the course, plus the inter and intra faith are not helping much, though the tolerance can be developed even if we live together with non muslims”.

“We are acquainted with a number of schools of thought. Thank God and Bridge course director Dr Rashid Shaz that we now do not consider each other as enemies. Our perceptions about West underwent a radical change. We were exposed to only the negative vices of west while its positive aspects were kept under wraps from us”, says Samreen who has completed her Alimiyat from reputed Jamiat ul Salihaat, Rampur. She is seconded by Saba Afreen who states, “It is only because of bridge course that our vision has broadened and we have been included into mainstream, making us eligible to take admission in any social science stream. The intra faith aspect of bridge course should be adopted by every madrasa to curtail the sectarianism growing among our ranks. It helped dispel many myths”. Saba has a suggestion that the syllabus should not be too lengthy but comprehensive with brevity. Also if madrasa and bridge course cooperation can be realized, certainly things can work out better.

Khushnuma Zaffar has completed her Alimiyat from Siraj ul Uloom, Aligarh and is all praise for the Bridge course but complains that science classes should not have been stopped abruptly when most of the students failed to pass them in internal assignments. Mehwish who is from Kashmir and has completed her Alimiyat from Rampur says that, “We came to know about the rigidity of various maslaks. Change happened and we shunned the rigidity. Further we got the confidence of speaking before boys in a mixed gender class, our wrong beliefs about West also changed. The Bridge course should further increase its intake capacity so that maximum students can benefit from it”.

“Bridge course initiative is a noble cause. We have been able to learn and write correct English. Bridge course students came from every school of thought so it has helped us understand them in a better manner. The course should introduce science once again”, concluded Rushda who completed her Fazeelat from Jamia Sirajul Uloom.

“We did not learn these things from our madrasas what we are taught in bridge course. There is a dialogue in most classes as compared to monotonous and monologue classes as prevalent in madrasas. Further the language skills that we learnt was an enormous uphill task but we did well, though the duration of the course should be extended and individual attention to the most weakest student be given”, concluded Hina Alauddin who had earlier completed her Alimiyat from Madrasa Salah lil Banat, Jamalpur.

Ruqqaya Fatima says, “My confidence level increased after attending the bridge course classes for a complete year. It certainly is a great start for the madrasa students. The segregation of boys and girls in different classes deprived us from vital resources of knowledge because boys used to raise questions and we benefitted from it a lot”. Fatima complains that, “The classes and syllabus

is too lengthy that it leaves a little time for the self study. Plus the social sciences classes should be started in the initial months only”.

“After Rashid Shaz sir’s classes we got to know about many things. We learnt about real Islam and were exposed to new issues. The Intra faith classes should be started in every madrasa so is the critical thinking that is born because of it. Through these tools we can understand each other better and co exist too. Thus a new generation of Muslims can be raised away from the sectarian strife”, says Aafia.

Sarwar Alam is the alumina of first batch of Bridge course and calls it, “The call of nature. The madrasas are quite closed and rigid when it comes to West, accepting and tolerating different schools of thought. We were quite fearful of West and upheld it as an enemy. Ulama did not expose us to understand West, but rendered us antagonistic towards it, without understanding and pondering over its secret of progress. Our research aptitude, critical analysis and power of distinction between right and wrong increased multi folded after bridge course. It certainly does not render us agents of Rashid Shaz or any distinct school of thought but has empowered us with new capabilities that were earlier unknown to us”.

Junaid Ahmad who has earlier completed his Alimiyat and now currently enrolled as bachelors students of Economics, shared his experience of Bridge course as, “Bridge course offered us an opportunity to meet, dialogue and understand students of other madrasas and schools of thought. Dr Rashid Shaz never imposed his views, but encouraged us to listen and read every Alim and through our own research reach out to concrete conclusions”.⁵⁰



⁵⁰ For more such success stories of students see, *La Madraza*, La Madraza Literary and Cultural Society, Bridge course Academy, AMU.

Preliminary Findings

In my conversations with scores of Bridge course students both pass outs and current ones, most of them obviously are praising the initiative because it offered them a unique opportunity to go for higher education in mainstream subjects particularly of social sciences, though many of them strongly desire to undertake their higher education in pure empirical sciences, that bridge course did start but then abruptly stopped. The students make a comparative analysis of the pedagogy, faculty, learning environment and skills that they received both as students of madrasa and now as Bridge course ones. Certainly they find glaring differences. “The Dars e Nizami has come to symbolize the stagnation and ossification of knowledge. It is taught through canonical texts which however are taught through commentaries (sharh), glosses or marginal notes (hashiya) and super commentaries (Taqarir). There are commentaries upon commentaries explained by even more commentaries. For the South Asian students they no longer explain the original text, being themselves in Arabic. They have to be learned by heart which makes the students use only their memory and not their analytical powers. Indeed the assumptions on which the Dars functions is that the past was in golden age in which all that was best has already been written. What remains to the modern age is merely to preserve it”.⁵¹ Eqbal Ahmad also criticized the modern madrasas, which bear little resemblance to the great mosque universities in the wider Muslim world in medieval times. Subjects such as mathematics, chemistry, botany, astronomy and philosophy were taught then, but not today, which makes it impossible for them to produce great philosophers, mathematicians and legists like the ones in the past. In a fierce condemnation Eqbal concluded: “their curriculum reduces Islam to a penal code, a ritual of ablutions and prayers, and a litany of crimes and those harsh here-and-now punishments. Thousands of energetic and motivated youth who graduate from these institutions are men abandoned in the middle of the ford, cut off from their real past, totally unprepared to meet the challenges of future and fevered by the dreams of a theocratic state in which they shall be assigned their merited roles”.⁵²

Further the madrasas of girls have different syllabi because they are thought to have different capabilities, with Ifta courses being a taboo as women are supposed to be subservient to men. The students talk about the madrasa curriculum being ill equipped to make them understand the current challenges of the times, to which Muslims need to respond. Dars e Nizami curriculum as conceived was quite progressive for its times and more temporal than transcendental as sensibly observed by Mushir ul Haq, “Even a cursory glance on the Nizami syllabus shows that syllabus served to equip students with more secular knowledge than religious. That was necessary because....the education aimed basically not to produce ‘religious preachers’ and the Ulama of

⁵¹ Tariq Rahman, *Madrasa: Religion, Poverty and the Potential for Violence* in Pakistan in the unpublished proceedings of the international workshop on Islamic learning in South Asia,, 19-21 May, 2005, IBZ, Erfurt, Germany, paper no.4.

⁵² Stuart Schaar, *Eqbal Ahmad: Critical Outsider in a Turbulent Age*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, P-96.

our present type, but to produce potential government servants”.⁵³ But now this curriculum has been granted a religious stature and any criticism or reform has been rendered akin to blasphemy.

The allegations that were time and again raised against Rashid Shaz for using bridge course for brain washing the students, to accept his ideas, degrade the stature of Ulama and increase his following was quite ill founded. Most of the students had not read his works, some who had differed with his ideas. Others accepted them but with a pinch of salt. The students were too busy with the heavy bridge course curriculum that left them with little time to debate Rashid Shaz’s ideas. Further this fact came to the fore that instead of imposing his own interpretation of issues related to Islam and Muslims, Rashid Shaz empowered students with skills that make them think critically about a number of issues. He raised their potential and aptitudes making them understand the need of further education and progressive, liberal, tolerant and pluralistic ethos of Islam. The opposition against Rashid Shaz is based much on personal vendetta of some members of university faculty and Ulama. They have now caused the furore based on his appointment as Director of Bridge course instead of rebutting his ideas through books, resorted to personal attacks against him. The students have reposed a complete faith in his integrity and leadership.

The students want the Bridge course to continue, and further expanded in various places in India so that other madrasa students can benefit from it. There are demands for the intake capacity to be increased further, but due to infrastructural reasons it may yet take more time. Further the students demand a permanent faculty that will certainly benefit them in the longer run. The success of Bridge course is evident from the fact that most students are able to compete with mainstream students and secure an admission in different streams and courses of social sciences, law and languages.



⁵³ Mushir Ul Haq, *Islam in Secular India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972, P-26-27.

Conclusion

Bridge course certainly is training a new generation of scholars and leadership of muslim community. Those who are direly opposed to its functioning will witness its fruits in the coming decade. Bridge course is a realization of founder of Aligarh Muslim University, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's dream of Philosophy being in the right hand, natural sciences in the left hand, and the crown of *La-Ilaha Illallah* (There is no God but Allah) on our heads. But it is a bitter reality that even Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's legacy and academic works have been rendered into oblivion as even in AMU he is a stranger. Rashid Shaz is now trying to get his exegesis of Quran published from the university but it is facing a huge opposition that too from the AMU fraternity. The intolerance to ideas is evident in the university and as well espoused by Arthur Schopenhauer "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident".

Bridge course as an initiative has a scope to be rendered into an institution or university that is solely dedicated to training madrasa students helping them to enter different walks of life after being exposed to modern streams of knowledge. This initiative certainly is helping to bridge the divide that is prevalent between religiously educated and modern educated muslims, thus putting an end to the dichotomy that has been a complex issue of division of Muslim community. The Bridge course initiative needs to be replicated at other places in India too as AMU alone cannot cater to the needs of whole Indian Muslim madrasa students. It certainly has the potential of improvement, that includes the introduction and teaching of science subjects. With the inclusion of science subjects, the madrasa students will have the choice of opting for more number of courses.

The course further empowers its students to master the universal English language that increase their scope of activities. They can promptly visit different countries of the world and be adjusted in various fields besides representing Islam. Also this initiative is helping build bridges across various antagonistic groups helping them understand each other better. Hence it makes the groups better integrate with each other.

"In a world that is shaped and controlled by another civilization, the real task facing the Muslim Umma is the creation of an intellectual space which is a genuine embodiment of the world view and culture of Islam. Without this intellectual space, reformist ideas and programmes will bear no fruit. Muslim civilization has a dire need of genuine intellectuals; unless Muslim societies cultivate the barren lands of today's intellectual vacuum, the Umma's marginalized existence will be institutionalized. The real world offers us no choice but to start our homework immediately".⁵⁴ Bridge course is an initiative that is currently involved in such homework.

⁵⁴ Omar Naseef Abdullah (ed.), *Today's Problems, Tomorrow's Solutions*, Mansell Publishing Limited, 1988, P-56.



The experience of operating Bridge course since its inception has been one of consecutive success, though obstacles and hurdles are the pathways to progress. Those who are opposing both Rashid Shaz and Bridge course either because of personal reasons or sheer ignorance need to be invited over. It will help clear several misconceptions related to the initiative.

The previous such attempts like Bridge course after running for few years died down a silent death. To safeguard bridge course from such a peril Dr Rashid Shaz must continue as its Director for atleast a decade. There are already divisive and nefarious plans being hatched against him, through university lobby. If such plans are successful, they certainly will not impact Prof. Rashid Shaz personally much but it certainly will be a collateral loss for the Indian Muslim community and AMU as a whole.

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